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ABSTRACT

Although volunteer tutors traditionally have formed the basis of the programs of Laubach Literacy Action and Literacy Volunteers of America, volunteers have begun to play a greater role in adult literacy instruction provided through community-based organizations, correctional institutions, churches, and federally funded adult basic education. Ilsley has identified five elements common to all literacy volunteer programs: purpose, scope, organizational control, professionalism, and finance. No single combination of these variables is appropriate for every station; instead, programs should be tailored to the needs of the group or community to be served. Likewise, selecting an appropriate administrative approach is important. Criteria for selecting volunteers, clarification of the assumptions about volunteers that are held by the organization developing the literacy program, and specification of the relationship between organizational setting and the establishment of a climate for volunteer participation are some of the many considerations that must be addressed. Administrators deciding to incorporate volunteers into adult literacy programs must also consider the myths, advantages, and disadvantages associated with literacy volunteerism. There is no shortage of resources available for those wishing to develop administrative guidelines and procedures for adult literacy volunteer programs, with as much as three-fourths of the literature base being devoted to administrative aspects of program development. (MN)

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OVERVIEW

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ADULT LITERACY VOLUNTEERS

Since the early 1980s, a number of efforts have focused attention on adult illiteracy and point to its growing recognition as a national problem. These include the Adult Literacy Initiative and the National Adult Literacy Project, carried out by the U.S. Department of Education; and the Business Council for Effective Literacy, formed by Howard McGraw as a vehicle to involve businesses in adult literacy programs at the local level. As a result of these recent efforts, a number of aspects of adult literacy education have been highlighted. Chief among these is adult literacy volunteerism. This ERIC Digest examines such aspects of adult literacy volunteerism as recent developments program characteristics, and advantages and disadvantages of using volunteers and suggests resources for use in developing volunteer programs.

Recent Developments in Adult Literacy Volunteerism

Volunteers have become an increasingly important component of adult literacy programs. Although volunteer tutors have formed the basis of the programs of Laubach Literacy Action (LLA) and Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) for many years, in the past 15 years the use of volunteers in adult literacy programs has spread to a number of other settings. Volunteers currently contribute to programs in such settings as federally funded adult basic education, community-based organizations, libraries, correctional institutions, and churches. As a result of increased use of volunteers in expanded settings, a new era of volunteerism is evolving. It is characterized by the following four trends: professionalization of volunteerism; changes in the makeup of the volunteer pool and a more varied use of volunteers; emergence of corporate-sponsored volunteers; and greater cooperation in the field (Kangisser 1985).

A number of recent developments have served to increase the visibility of the literacy volunteer movement. Chief among these has been the development of a national advertising campaign designed to attract volunteers into literacy settings through public service television and print announcements. The campaign, which was developed through the efforts of the Coalition for Literacy and the American Association of Advertising Agencies, prompted more than 50,000 individuals to offer their services in its first 5 months of operation (Ilsley 1985).

As a result of increased visibility and use, volunteers are perceived as a valuable resource for adult literacy programs. However, their role must be considered and planned for within the comprehensive framework or structure of a program. If it is not, volunteers are likely to be a liability rather than an asset to an adult literacy program.

Characteristics of Literacy Volunteer Programs

Through an analysis of the literature, Ilsley (1985) identifies five elements common to all literacy volunteer programs: purpose, scope, organizational control, professionalism, and finance. Although each literacy program possesses all five of these elements, variation within each of the elements leads to the great diversity that exists among programs. A brief description of each element demonstrates how this diversity occurs.

- **Purpose** refers to the goals of the program, its mission, and objectives. Literacy programs usually have one of the following as their major purpose: teaching reading and numeracy skills; problem solving through the acquisition of coping skills; or political action.
- **Scope** means population and area served. Programs may restrict their services either to a geographic area or to a specific subgroup of the population.
- **Organizational setting** refers to the organizational arrangement of the program. Programs may be independent or they may be affiliated with larger organizations such as LVA or LLA. Independent programs may be attached to a larger organization or may receive funds from multiple sponsors. A few literacy programs are both private and independent, that is, they stand alone with no direct financial or organizational association with another organization.
- **Professionalism** refers to the practice of training and using the skills of volunteers. Among literacy programs there is great variation in the selection and preparation of volunteers as well as in the roles assigned and expected standards of performance. In some programs volunteers receive extensive amounts of training and are expected to assume an extraordinary amount of responsibility. Training and role assignments do not always correspond, however, as sometimes volunteers receive little or no training while being expected to carry out a variety of duties.
- **Finance** means amount and source of revenue used to finance a program. Again, there is great variation in how programs are financed. Some receive funding from a single source, while others rely on multisource funding. A few programs use only grass roots fund-raising techniques.

The variations within each of the five variables mean that many options exist for literacy programming. No single model of literacy volunteerism is appropriate for every situation; instead, a program should be developed based upon the needs of the group or community to be served.

Administrative Considerations

Since no single administrative approach satisfactorily serves all types of literacy volunteer programs, deciding upon which model to follow is an important administrative consideration. However, before managerial strategies are established, the educational philosophy upon which they will be based needs to be articulated and agreed upon by those responsible for program development. A program's philosophy forms the basis for policy decisions about the five variables of purpose, scope, organizational setting, professionalism, and finance. At the policy level Ilsley (1985) lists some key questions that need to be addressed regarding volunteers and that are related to the five variables including the following:

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- Should volunteers be selected according to program purposes?
- Should anyone be allowed to volunteer? If not, by what criteria ought volunteers to be selected?
- Are assumptions about volunteers similar at all levels of the organization?
- What is the relationship between organizational setting and the establishment of a climate for volunteer participation?
- Do volunteers, particularly those with high levels of expertise, pose a threat to paid staff?
- Should volunteer training be planned jointly by volunteers and paid administrative personnel?

The Myths, Advantages, and Disadvantages of Literacy Volunteerism

In making a decision to incorporate volunteers into its program structure, administrators need to be aware of the myths, advantages, and disadvantages associated with literacy volunteerism. Kangisser (1985) points out two prevailing myths about literacy volunteers: volunteerism is a panacea and the use of volunteers is low-cost or cost-free. The illiteracy problem in this country is simply too large to be solved solely through the use of volunteers. Also, although the use of volunteers can be cost-effective, it still demands an investment of program resources and staff time.

Administrators should also consider the advantages and disadvantages of literacy volunteerism. Kangisser (1985) mentions the following advantages: it allows for private or small group instruction thus allowing adult illiterates to "save face"; it is flexible, for example individuals can be served in many locations at mutually convenient times; because literacy volunteerism is characterized by a one-to-one relationship, volunteers can develop trust and inspire confidence in those they tutor; it focuses community attention on the illiteracy problem; and since many volunteers develop materials, it can result in increased instructional resources.

Disadvantages cited by Kangisser (1985) include the following: instruction is rarely intensive, resulting in slow student progress and thus, many become discouraged and dropout; since volunteer programs must serve two groups—students and volunteers—paid staff may be distracted and program purposes diluted; and unless effective managerial procedures are established, it is difficult to maintain quality control and adequate record keeping and to administer evaluation procedures. In order for literacy volunteerism to be an effective component, its advantages must outweigh these kinds of limitations.

Resources for Program Development

There is no shortage of resources for those wishing to develop administrative guidelines and procedures for adult literacy volunteer programs. In reviewing the related literature, Ilsley (1985) notes that as much as three-fourths of the literature base is devoted to materials describing the administrative aspects of program development. The following publications will serve as helpful resources for those seeking more information on this aspect of adult literacy volunteerism.

- *Organizing a Successful Adult Literacy Program* (Darling, Puckett, and Paull 1983) describes procedures used by the Jefferson County Adult Reading Program, a program that was approved for the National Diffusion Network. Organized in five sections, the publication covers organization, staff development and training, student retention and recruitment, instructional design, and accountability and evaluation.
- *Guidebook for Effective Literacy Practice* (Crandall, Lerche, and Marchilonis 1985), a publication developed by the National Adult Literacy Project staff, is designed to provide current, detailed information on effective literacy practices. It reports on the results of a mail survey in which 225 programs responded to questions about the following program aspects: recruitment, orientation, counseling, diagnostic testing, instructional methods and materials, assessment of learners, follow-up, and program evaluation. Although this publication covers all types of literacy programs, and not just those that incorporate volunteers, it provides information that is helpful to the latter.
- *Guidelines for Effective Adult Literacy Programs* (Mayer 1984) is intended to assist individuals involved in the development, administration, and delivery of volunteer-based community adult literacy programs. It includes information on community, adult learners, staff resources, instruction and support, governance, management, evaluation, program records, and resources. Although the guide does not provide step-by-step instructions for program development, it does describe the components of a successful program through a collection of statements on what a program should do to be effective.

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